



## Demystifying the Policy Process:

### Supporting Sustainability and Adoption of Project LAUNCH Practices through Policy

By Sarah Davidon, Ed.D.

#### Introduction

The Project LAUNCH (Linking Actions for Unmet Needs in Children's Health) initiative aims to promote child health and wellness through provision of evidence-based programs and strategies that are integrated within systems that serve families during early childhood. These efforts are guided by the five core LAUNCH strategies of screening and assessment, enhanced home visiting, mental health consultation, family strengthening and parent skills training, and integration of behavioral health into primary care settings. Starting and ultimately sustaining these activities involves more than securing funding. Policy development can be critical to ensuring that LAUNCH grant activities are integrated into established child-serving systems and have the potential to make lasting change.

Despite the significant role that policy can have in providing widespread and long-term support for Project LAUNCH efforts, the process for translating LAUNCH practices into policies can seem daunting and opaque. Where do we begin? How should we identify opportunities and set goals for policy development and change in early childhood systems? What are appropriate roles for LAUNCH grantees, and how can we engage stakeholders such as families in the process?



There are multiple types of policies that are relevant within the context of Project LAUNCH, from organizational policies to legislation. The focus of this brief is on legislative, fiscal, and regulatory policy; this brief provides an understanding of how these types of policies can support Project LAUNCH goals, including strengthening of child-serving systems and sustainability of the core Project LAUNCH strategies. This brief is written for Project LAUNCH grantees and is intended to help them increase their knowledge of policy processes and points of impact, engage their partners in policy development, and develop a coordinated plan of action. Throughout this document, we provide guided questions, action steps, and examples of real policy changes to help grantees identify ways to focus on policy change and development within their Project LAUNCH grant activities.

## The Role of Policy

The term policy means a formalized decision or action that provides direction for how systems, services, funding, or rules will be implemented. We can think of policies as “levers” that can be pulled to address or change systems or regulations on a broad scale. These levers are tools to achieve outcomes or drive widespread change. There are multiple types of policy levers that can be pulled to support Project LAUNCH goals. One might immediately think of the creation or changing of laws, but there are other levers that can be pulled as well, such as through changes in how state funding is allocated. Taking Project LAUNCH activities to scale might require multiple policy levers. For example, both a regulatory lever (passing a law) and a financial lever (the state budget process) might be used to ensure child and maternal mental health screening is part of developmental surveillance for all children.

*The 2014 Cross-Site Evaluation of Project LAUNCH indicates that 70 percent of grantees in the first three cohorts have implemented state-level policy changes either directly or in partnership with other state programs. Fifty-four percent of grantees have been involved in community-level policy initiatives to improve care coordination and expanding behavioral health services for at-risk families.*

The 2014 cross site evaluation of Project LAUNCH indicated that many grantees are developing legislative policies and practices designed to enhance children’s health and development.<sup>i</sup> While developing or changing policies can take time and may require executive-level or legislative approval, this did not deter grantees from working on policy reform. These policy development efforts have the potential to reap benefits at multiple levels; concurrent work between state and local initiatives, particularly when it involves policy development, strengthens early childhood service delivery at the local level.<sup>ii</sup>

*Example: A Project LAUNCH grantee has a goal of ensuring that preventative screening for children’s social emotional development as well as maternal depression are included in primary health care. Several local primary care practices identified that there was not the ability to conduct a depression screening for new mothers at a young child’s well-child visit because the child was the patient, not the mother. By sharing this barrier with Project LAUNCH partners, these partners were able to work with the state Medicaid office and the state legislature to change financing policies so that screening for maternal depression under the child’s Medicaid identification number in pediatric practices is reimbursable. Through this policy change, a statewide system was put into place that supports a two-generation approach to health care, and now community health practices have a more integrated approach to care.*



Policy strategies can be an important way to contribute to the sustainability of programs, services, partnerships, and other Project LAUNCH efforts. Project LAUNCH communities are charged with improving the availability, accessibility, and quality of early childhood mental health supports, so it is important to understand the various determinants of this system and have the necessary skills to partner for system improvements. Policy can help to standardize the type, quality, or fidelity of services that are sustained over time; such as a policy linking funding to program standards. Policy processes and system-level strategies yield the strongest support for sustainable, wide-scale supports and services.

*Policy has the power to do things such as shape child-serving systems, influence social determinants of health, and impact the accessibility and affordability of care for young children and their families. Embedding Project LAUNCH activities into these systems through policy can be an important way to sustain, scale, and fund Project LAUNCH efforts.*

## The Legislative Process, Regulations, and Rule-making

Project LAUNCH strategies are often impacted by state policy. Often federal laws enforce minimum standards, and state laws can expand upon these to improve and scale-up service delivery, access, and funding. As an example of this, at the federal level, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) is responsible for implementing laws passed by Congress related to Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), and the Basic Health Program. To implement these programs, CMS issues guidance to explain how laws will be implemented and what states and others need to do to comply. Each state then implements Medicaid differently and administers its own program, establishing its own eligibility standards and determining the scope of services provided as well as setting the rate of payment for services. States can develop new integrated care models for beneficiaries and explore new provider payment models, which could, in turn, be informed by and support Project LAUNCH goals. Another example of federal level policy interacting with state policy is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The federal law identifies what all states must do to meet the needs of students with disabilities; but states interpret the rules and pass state laws on how to apply them.



One mechanism for policy development or change is through laws. At the state level, this typically happens through legislation. While state legislative processes may vary from state to state, there are some common denominators. There are basic rules that a bill going through the state legislature will follow; understanding the basic process will provide an understanding of impactful touchpoints in the process, and where the bill is in its progress. [StateScape<sup>iii</sup>](#) gives a state-by-state understanding of how the legislative process works. .

At the state level, once a bill has passed and it becomes a law (and goes into state statute), state agencies then must put these laws into effect by creating and enforcing rules and regulations. Laws don't usually include the details of information about how the law should be implemented, but instead provide the framework for the issue. Regulations that are established to define how a statute should be implemented can be an effective mechanism for incorporating Project LAUNCH efforts into policy. For example, regulations that guide workforce requirements or certifications can include early childhood mental health and social emotional development.

Usually regulations are created and enacted through a rule-making process. A unique opportunity in the rule-making process is public input. This is when state agencies allow citizens to participate in the creation of state regulations through public hearings and soliciting public input. The public input process can provide an opportunity for families, non-state agency staff, and partner organizations to help shape how laws are implemented. Project

LAUNCH partnerships with families and members of the public who are able to provide public input can impact shared goals.

*Example: In Colorado, early childhood mental health stakeholders wanted to make sure that infant and early childhood mental health consultation was a part of the infrastructure in the early care and education system. Project LAUNCH staff worked with community partners who provided public input on the rules that regulate child care centers. The rules indicated that child care providers should have access to a mental health consultant, and also included language to specifically address children's social emotional health and development.*

### Project LAUNCH 10 Steps Towards Change Through Legislative Policy

The Project LAUNCH core strategies, and the additional interconnected Project LAUNCH efforts such as evaluation, workforce development, collaboration, public awareness, integration, and system change, could be strengthened, sustained, and scaled through policy. Policies can help to define and integrate, for example, standards for delivery of integrated care, and can address the conditions that are necessary for that care to occur.

To have strategic policy impact, grantees should think about **why** a policy might need to be developed or changed to sustain the high quality and innovative work of Project LAUNCH. Assess at **what level** (local, state, or federal) the policy change would be needed to help determine **partners and champions** with whom to work. Assess **what exists and what is still needed** to understand where energy should be concentrated. Identify the **specific policy** that needs to be created or changed. Work to **build support** among partners and funders. And most importantly **stay in communication**, and **follow up** by providing information, sharing evaluation results, and “staying on the radar.”

To best effect change and sustain Project LAUNCH efforts through policy, follow these ten steps:

1. Learn the specifics of how policy is developed in your state or community: *find each state's legislative process [here](#).*
2. Seek out areas of policy that relate to Project LAUNCH strategies and efforts: *areas such as Medicaid state plan benefits, reimbursement rates, and early intervention could have relevance.*
3. Be able to clearly state why a policy needs to be developed or changed: *develop a short but effective “elevator pitch” of 27 words or less.<sup>iv</sup>*
4. Learn about others who are working on policy development and contact them: *early childhood committees, early intervention councils, and membership organizations might all have policy agendas.*
5. Find websites and explore resources that provide information about participating in policy-related activities: *Secretaries' of State websites, the Women's League of Voters, and membership organizations often can provide this kind of information.*
6. Investigate any health policy agendas that legislators have for their terms in office: *policymakers might be interested in health insurance coverage, mental health parity, or preschool suspensions and expulsions, for example; all of these are areas that can connect to Project LAUNCH efforts.*
7. Find ways to connect legislators' agendas to early childhood mental health and development: *help policymakers “connect the dots” between their priorities and early childhood; even an interest such as rural transportation could be relevant if families can't access services.*

8. Identify champion policymakers for early childhood mental health and development: *a policymaker who has a personal connection to the issues could be an important ally.*
9. Prepare an educational fact sheet or volunteer your expertise in meetings: *Project LAUNCH grantees have lessons learned and data to share.*
10. Inform community members of activities that help them stay connected to policymakers: *Project LAUNCH grantee participation in committees, meetings, and conferences can be important mechanisms for informing the community of current issues and progress.*

### Partnerships in Policy

Building policy solutions for sustainable Project LAUNCH strategies and efforts requires collaboration and collective activity among various partners. Collaboration can be an important element of policy impact, with multiple stakeholders working to address common issues from various directions. By sharing information, strategies, and priorities with their peers and partners, Project LAUNCH grantees can deepen a community's understanding of needs, increase shared knowledge about Project LAUNCH goals, and augment each other's work. Additionally, work with collaborative partners can reach policymakers in ways that Project LAUNCH grantees alone cannot.

Project LAUNCH grant recipients are not allowed to use federal funding to lobby federal, state, or local officials or their staff to receive additional funding or influence legislation.<sup>v</sup> Grantees, and others – such as family members and family-led other organizations, can educate policymakers about the needs of children and families. . Research on family involvement in children's mental health demonstrates that family participation promotes positive changes in the ways that children are served. Families can be strong allies in policy change. Project

LAUNCH communities can promote and support family leadership in policy development through activities that intentionally strengthen families as leaders and provide opportunities to share their real experiences. To educate policymakers, family voices and authentic experiences can provide needed qualitative stories of impact to complement quantitative information.

There are limitations on how LAUNCH grantees can interact with policymakers; however, there are several ways Project LAUNCH grantees can educate policymakers to inform and improve services, policies, and programs. Examples of educating policymakers on the Project LAUNCH impact and the needs of constituents include:

1. Developing a fact sheet about the effects of enacting or not enacting a policy

*Example: A Project LAUNCH community can collect evaluation data on how use of a validated social emotional screening tool during pediatric well-child visits prevents more serious mental health interventions. This information is then provided as an objective fact sheet to help inform a decision about a state's Medicaid coverage of a specified social emotional screening tool in well-child visits.*

2. Allowing a policymaker to visit a Project LAUNCH service site so that s/he may see firsthand how a policy or funding decision can make a difference on day-to-day operations

*Example: A state's tobacco tax dollars are used to fund early childhood mental health consultants in the state. There is an upcoming decision in the state legislature about increasing the funding for this program. A legislator asks to visit a Project LAUNCH early childhood mental health consultation site and talk to staff about the impact of the program.*

3. Serving as an information resource on how Project LAUNCH efforts have helped constituents

*Example: Project LAUNCH leadership can work with families in the community served to share specific examples of how early childhood mental health consultation has prevented their children from being expelled from preschool programs.*

### Using Data to Drive Policy

Through sharing lessons learned and helping policymakers identify policy barriers and opportunities, Project LAUNCH grantees can bridge a gap and be purveyors of information. Policymakers usually want to consider evidence of a successful practice in their decision making. However, they may face the challenge of not knowing where to find research and evidence.

Grantees and their partners can be a resource to policymakers through activities such as sharing evaluation findings to explain barriers to Project LAUNCH efforts, as well as providing evidence that strategies work. To effectively do this, grantees need to provide information that is:

- *Actionable* (there is a clear policy recommendation)
- *Cumulative* (draws from not just one but multiple examples)
- *Explainable* (lessons can be learned, and successes can be described through fact sheets, brief presentations, or talking points)
- *Relevant* (ties into the policymaker's context)
- *Timely* (you're there when information is needed to make decisions)

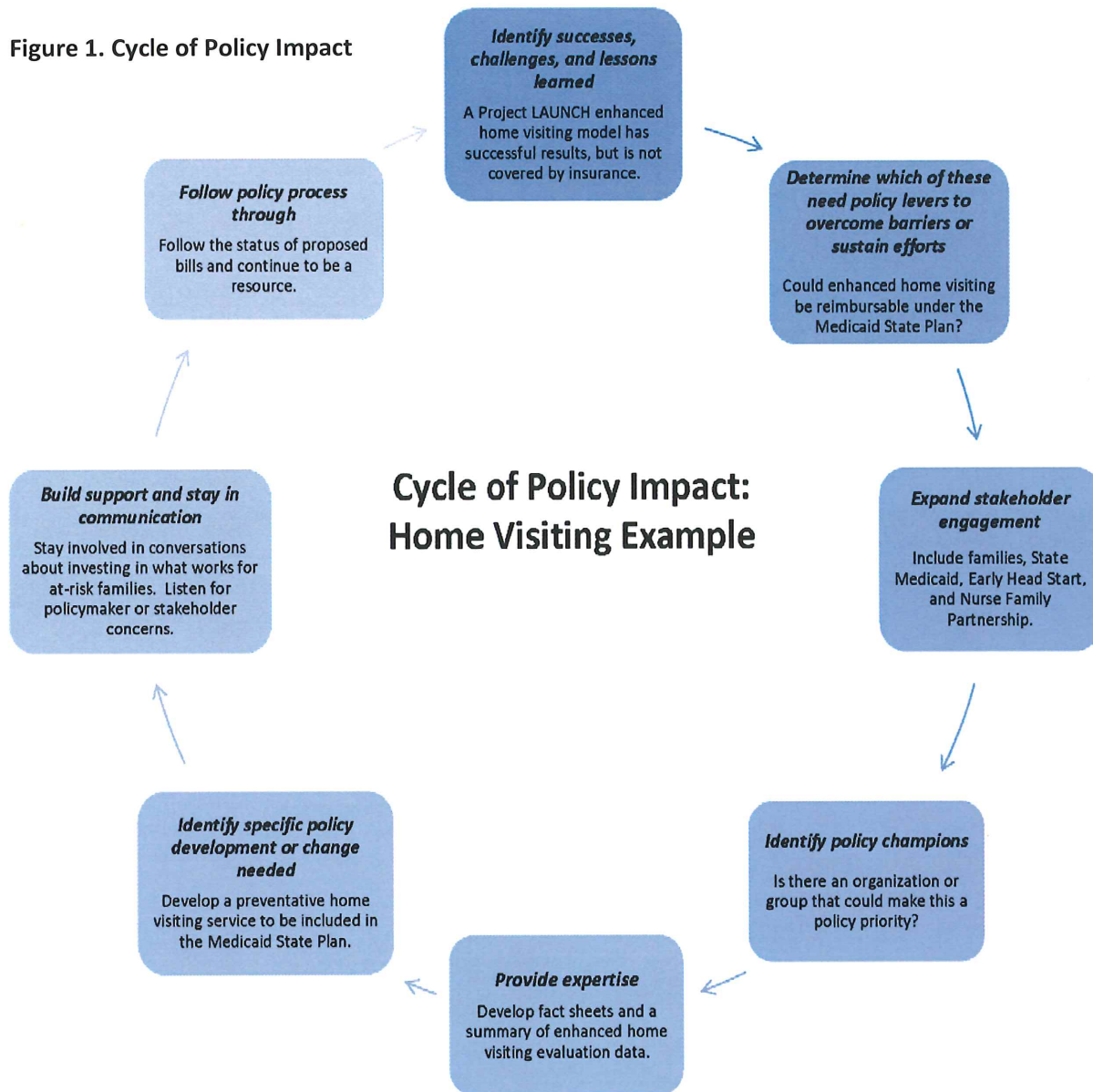
- *Unbiased* (free from a political agenda)
- *Understandable* (information is presented in a non-technical way)

One of the most effective strategies for achieving lasting, systemic change is to ensure that project leadership and partners can communicate the successes and barriers of Project LAUNCH efforts to policymakers and entities that can support Project LAUNCH approaches over time. Project LAUNCH communities can use their successes and lessons learned to educate policymakers on what works, where barriers exist, and where improvements are needed. There is great potential for policy to be driven by evidence of program effectiveness, which can be crucial to get political, administrative, and financial support for bringing initiatives to scale. This can happen through effective dissemination of results and strong partnerships with policymakers.

Project LAUNCH grantees and their family, community, and organizational partners can be important actors in the cycle of policy impact. Grant outcomes, lessons learned, and assessment of barriers and gaps can be used to inform policy development and policy changes for a more integrated and sustainable early childhood system. Figure 1 demonstrates an example of how this could work.

*Research can and should inform policy. Use evaluation results to share successes and incorporate effective practices into policy. Does your model of early childhood mental health consultation, when implemented with fidelity, show improved social emotional development or reduce preschool expulsions? Decision-makers need to know this.*

Figure 1. Cycle of Policy Impact



Make identification of policy barriers and policy levers an intentional part of your Project LAUNCH work by asking four questions about how policy can support the legacy your project will leave:

1. What policies can support strategies, services, and activities that should carry on after federal funding is no longer in place?
2. What can you start to do or change to create the policy?
3. What systems need to be put in place to sustain project goals and outcomes?
4. Which of these systems need correlated policy development or change?

### Pulling It All Together: A Vision for Connecting Policy to Project LAUNCH

Policy has a role in sustaining, scaling up, funding, and embedding Project LAUNCH efforts in child-serving systems; to ensure this happens, policymakers need information from the communities they serve. Grantees have an opportunity to provide real-world examples of what works in child- and family-serving systems and the impact of these efforts on the lives of children and families. Policymakers must factor in many things in their decision making: capacity, political constraints, funding, and

feasibility, for example. Although policymakers will still need to consider all these factors even if you provide them with evidence that a service is needed, or a program works well, there is high value in incorporating lessons learned and evaluation results into policy decision making.

Project LAUNCH work *can* yield policy change by identifying specific actions that can be taken, and by calling out conditions or circumstances that impact early childhood mental health and development. Through policy, Project LAUNCH communities can ensure young children and their families succeed.

## Further Resources

---

Community Toolbox on Changing Policies from the Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas. <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/implement/changing-policies>

National Center for Children in Poverty: State Early Childhood Policies.

[http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text\\_725.pdf](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_725.pdf)

National Conference of State Legislatures: Early Care and Education 2016 State Legislative Action.

<http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/early-care-and-education-2016-legislative-action.aspx>

National Conference of State Legislatures: Policy Strategies to Advance Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health.

<http://www.ncsl.org/blog/2016/11/22/policy-strategies-to-advance-infant-and-early-childhood-mental-health.aspx>

Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation's Implementation of Project LAUNCH: Cross-site Evaluation Findings, Volumes I & II.

[https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/launch\\_implementation\\_report\\_12\\_29\\_14\\_final\\_508.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/launch_implementation_report_12_29_14_final_508.pdf)

Pathways to "Evidence-informed" Policy and Practice: A Framework for Action.

<http://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article/figure?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.0020166.g001>

SAMHSA Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies: You Gotta Hear This! Developing an Effective Elevator Pitch. <https://www.samhsa.gov/capt/sites/default/files/resources/you-gotta-hear-this-elevator-pitch.pdf>

State policies to promote social-emotional and behavioral health of young children in child care settings in partnership with families. [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/occ/ccdf\\_acf\\_im\\_2015\\_01.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/occ/ccdf_acf_im_2015_01.pdf)

The National Implementation Research Network's Active Implementation Hub Practice to Policy Feedback Loops.

<http://implementation.fpg.unc.edu/module-5/topic-3-practice-policy-feedback-loops>

ZERO TO THREE Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Policy Convening. Aligning Policy and Practice: Mental Health Assessment and Treatment of Infants, Young Children, and Families.

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1701-zero-to-three-infant-and-early-childhood-mental-health-policy-convening-report>

---

<sup>i</sup> Goodson, Barbara, Todd Grindal, Catherine Darrow, Margaret Gwaltney, Deborah Klein Walker, Brandy Wyant, Cristofer Price. (2014). Outcomes of Project LAUNCH: Cross-site Evaluation Findings, Volume II. OPRE Report 2014-88. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.statescape.com/resources/legislative/legislativeprocess.aspx>

<sup>iv</sup> From *Power Prism's* "Developing Your Persuasive Message: The 27-9-3 Rule." Retrieved from [http://powerprism.org/27-9-3\\_Worksheet.pdf](http://powerprism.org/27-9-3_Worksheet.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> Federal Restrictions on Lobbying for HHS Financial Assistance Recipients (<https://www.hhs.gov/grants/grants/grants-policies-regulations/lobbying-restrictions.html>)